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## **Towards the Modern Alternative Theatre in Poland – Selected Issues**

### **1. Introduction**

The World War II resulted in many losses in Polish theatre circles. After the war the most important task was to reactivate and revive theatre activity in the whole country, to reconstruct theatre buildings, to educate a new generation of actors and directors who would be able to meet the requirements of the new political, cultural and demographic situation of the country.

In 1949 the principles of socialist realism were officially established as obligatory for Polish theatre, which effectively restricted artistic freedom of theatre creators. The fear of being accused of formalism significantly discouraged experiments with theatre form, while the fear of being suspected of cosmopolitanism deprived the repertoire of original productions and unique interpretations of the world drama. Many pre-war creators and young creative artists found it difficult to work within the imposed convention.

Nationalisation of Polish stage which took place at that time resulted in a centralised system of theatre management. The state decree of 1946 introduced an institution of preventive censorship supervised by political and state authorities. Dogmatic restrictions of Socialist Realism, i.e. Exclusion of Polish classical literature from the repertoire, especially the works

of Polish Romanticism, and endorsement of immature and weak 'proletarian' plays on stage, made the audience lose interest and trust in the theatre as a form of art.

After Stalin's death in 1953, severe criticism of his 'personality cult' was openly presented at the 20<sup>th</sup> Communist Party Congress in 1956. The protest against the still existing political practice was strongest in Poland and Hungary. The 1956 workers' manifestations in Poznań were suppressed by force with no attempt of a political compromise. Many people were killed then. Particularly negative results could be observed in the cultural policy of the state. Conflicts between the communist party and creative circles intensified. Especially intellectuals and students manifested their critical attitude towards the political situation.

Political and social changes of 1955–56 in Poland were reflected in the cultural life as well. Many restrictions were lifted which in fact helped in prosperous development of Polish theatre. The repertoire was modernised. Polish and foreign classical plays were staged again. Theatres began to present a large variety of contemporary plays: by B. Brecht, J. P. Sartre, A. Camus, F. Dürrenmatt, E. O'Neill, A. Miller, M. Frisch as well as Polish contemporary authors including T. Różewicz and S. Mrożek. Stage productions were enriched by the works of French Neo-Avant-garde (S. Beckett, J. Genet, E. Ionesco, J. Cocteau) and rediscovery of Polish pre-war Avant-garde – S. I. Witkiewicz, W. Gombrowicz, B. Jasieński, T. Peiper.

Avant-garde drama, despite the fact that it was difficult for the audience and not always staged by means of the stage language cohesive enough and appropriate for the absurd theatre, played a significant role in forming new means of stage and acting expression. In a way it also ennobled Polish theatre in Polish cultural and artistic life. It became a sphere of work for a few significant Polish theatre creators, first of all the original visual creators working within the institutional repertory theatre yet creating their individual 'personal' theatre characterised by unique stylistics and methods of work with actors.

## 2. The creations of Józef Szajna, Tadeusz Kantor and Jerzy Grotowski

In the 1950s and 60s *Józef Szajna* co-operated with many theatres in Poland preparing original stage-visual creations.<sup>1</sup> Later he became famous as a director, fully expressing his artistic ideas in the Studio Theatre in Warsaw where he became artistic director in 1971.

A controversial and exceptional image of his theatre work was characterised by focus on an autonomous creation of a performance, a unique idea of 'directing by means of staging', limiting the importance of words in a performance, a variety of visual elements, and an original way of marking actors' presence.

Important for the circles of the young Polish intelligentsia at that time was not only the innovative artistic experiments but also the poetics of Szajna's performances, the motives of damage and destruction, his vision of 'cultural cemetery'. Although undoubtedly it was to be associated with the artist's personal war experience (his stay in concentration camps, a death sentence and a miraculous escape from it), the fact of referring to the motif of decay of the whole contemporary civilisation made him close to the generation of the time of counterculture contest (Czannerle, 1974).

This motif was perfectly expressed in the subsequent versions of "*Rep-lika*" ("Replica"), 1971, a production full of moving images, symbols of apocalyptic destruction, exceptional ways of acting. *Replica* in the Studio Theatre took place in a big art atelier (Czannerle, 1974; Grodzicki, 1979). The audience seats are placed along the walls. In the centre of the room there is a refuse heap: rags, shoes, ropes, wheels, plastic and stumps of dummies. Suddenly it starts to smoke. Then a man in rags emerges followed by other barefoot people with their hair closely cropped. They rummage through the surrounding refuse. They have risen from the dead. The horror of extermination camps can be observed among these horribly injured human remnants. A superman-like robot incites cruelty and destruction.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1962 Szajna and Jerzy Grotowski prepared the renowned production of "*Akropolis*" ("Acropolis").

In "*Replica*" the language was very precise, cohesive and expressive. Words were limited to a minimum and the actors emitted only some inarticulate sounds, groans, and wails. Single scenes were composed in a series of mimes, pictorial compositions were explicitly vivid. The effect was achieved with the simplest props that suddenly became extraordinary.

In case of Szajna, the personal view expressed both in "*Replica*" and in other performances that were the artist's interpretation of great masterpieces of the world literature became the element which justified formation of a universal vision of the world and an expression of superior laws.

In other famous stage creations, Szajna expressed his attitude towards the everlasting conflict between the artist and society ("*Witkacy*", 1971, based on dramas by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz), considered the essence of art and its role for the society ("*Gulgutiera*", 1973), measured human power of life affirmation confronted with the world which overwhelms human beings and condemns them to be defeated ("*Faust*", 1971), created a story of a man who in the world of cruelty drifts between crime and sanctity, with intention to be good and to cause suffering (in "*Dante*", 1974, an innovative interpretation of "The Divine Comedy"), or expressed his hope that ideas and human efforts, even if they came from illusions, were able to resist the omnipresent obscurantism and meanness ("*Cervantes*", 1976).

Apart from Szajna there were other artists who tried to protect their creation from fossilisation and unification, who isolated themselves from the institutional theatre and formed their own groups that went beyond the limits of the restricted notion of professionalism. Their approach confirmed the will of existence beyond the officially supported model of socialist culture, simultaneously contributing to alternative arts in Poland.

*Tadeusz Kantor* was the one who strongly manifested his artistic autonomy. He did not subject his activity to any ideology (merely to his subsequent individually formed artistic theories) and he avoided any institutionalisation. He was an independent creator with the right to see the world from his own point of view and to undertake a continuous artistic experiment. Kantor, an avantgarde creator, eventually reached the point of opposing the avant-garde itself.

All his life he expressed his creative awareness announcing subsequent manifests and artistic proclamations while his theatre performances gave

a chance to verify specific theories in practice (Grodzicki, 1979; Kłosowicz, 1991). It is worth mentioning that Kantor situated theatre in the area of art and its aspects, and never separated his painting from theatrical experiments. Regardless of the subsequent stages of his creative reflection, he considered theatre to be the theatre of 'reality' and not the theatre of stage illusion.

Kantor was one of the most radical exponents of Informel art in Europe. The explicit example of 'Informel Theatre' was his production of "*W małym dworcu*" ("Country House"), 1961 by Witkacy (*Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz*). He attempted to destroy the form and to leave both the matter and the action to random chance. The actors milled around with chaotic gestures and uttered broken fragments of sentences.

The 'Informel Theatre' was followed by the 'Zero Theatre'. In the production of "*Wariat i zakonnica*" ("The madman and the Nun"), 1963 by Witkacy the actors huddled up on stage cluttered with piled-up folding chairs and spoke their lines without acting or interpreting their parts. The story, the dialogue and the action were thus reduced to zero and the actors were neutralised, hence the name: 'Zero Theatre'.

The next step, the 'Happening Theatre', was marked by productions in which objects did not serve any special purpose or action. Things simply existed as objects, people carried on ordinary activities. Repeated over and over again, these activities lost their practical purpose, they became autonomous. Actors were also treated like objects; they were simply 'ready-for-use' objects.

Kantor called the next stage of his work the "'I" Theatre' or the 'Impossible Theatre'. The "'I" Theatre' had no stage and the actors moved from one real setting to another (for example to a glacier in the Alps), where the most unbelievable and virtually impossible events took place. Kantor assumed that there might exist a work that is not made for traditional reception and in spite of this it is a work of art. A work without any form, with no aesthetic values, an impossible work that has no references to reality. It just exists and in this way it changes the character of reality in which it appeared attributing almost artistic value to it.

A few performances of the 1970s and 80s ("*Umarła klasa*" ("The Dead Class"), 1975, "*Wielopole, Wielopole*", 1980, "*Niech szczerą artyści*" ("Let the Artists Die"), 1985, "*Nigdy tu już nie powrócę*" ("I Shall Never Return"),

1988 or “*Dziś są moje urodziny*” (“Today Is my Birthday”), 1991 staged after the artist’s death) put into practice probably the most interesting of Kantor’s ideas – the ‘Theatre of Death’ (Kłosowicz, 1991).

The cycle of performances expressing the theoretical assumptions of the ‘Theatre of Death’ was opened by the performance of “The Dead Class” which was a specific journey into the past (Pleśniarowicz, 1990; Kłosowicz, 1991). This journey could not have happened without the necessary attribute – death that for the artist was The Lowest Stage of Existence.

“The Dead Class” is a collage of images that are characterised by moving visual art and a marvellous composition of movement and sound. In the performance, the actors are accompanied by dummies, the counterparts of adults from their childhood. Kantor reveals here the singular function of the actor and the dummy as the exponents of death: “*Life can be expressed in art only through the absence of life*” (cited after Grodzicki, 1979, p.121).<sup>2</sup> According to Kantor, in the theatre the dummy is to become a model through which a strong feeling of death emanates, a model for a living actor.

The performance is concerned with relations between the stages of human life, stressing both the effect of passing time and the continuity of existence. The world presented in the performance is a grotesque image of school with its most stereotype representations spread between the visions of birth and death. The performance, full of various references, becomes a vision of human death but also an image of decay of a certain culture.

Kantor himself, like in case of his previous performances, walks back and forth among the actors and the audience, observes how the action proceeds, intervenes. He directs the group of amateurs, many times he starts and stops the machine of life and death.

In the process of forming the concept of alternative culture in Poland and abroad, the activity of *Jerzy Grotowski* and his Laboratory Theatre was among the most important one. Jerzy Grotowski is undoubtedly the best-known Polish creator, not only in the domain of theatre, but in the world of contemporary art in general. It is often said that after Grotowski, one of the greatest reformers of the contemporary stage, theatre will never be the same as before.

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<sup>2</sup> All citations translated by Elżbieta Rodzeń-Leśnikowska.

A theatre theoretician, teacher, author of an acting method began with staging in Polish institutional theatres. Although he was not successful, he was regarded as a director searching for the way to new theatre which would be a kind of dialogue, a direct exchange of intellectual approaches between the stage and the audience. Particularly in the Theatre of 13 Rows in Opole, he gradually transformed the forms of performance adopted from the theatre he found there, establishing new relationships between literature and performance, stage and audience, actor and observer. The most important performance of that time was "*Akropolis*" ("Acropolis") based on *Stanisław Wyspiański's* work, staged in cooperation with Józef Szajna, a kind of review of values created by human civilisation. Yet instead of apotheosis we saw death, a destruction of culture symbolised by an ultimate cemetery located in the concentration camp of Auschwitz.

The actors, condemned men wearing costumes made of torn sacks and clogs, built the camp according to the rhythm of orders (Grodzicki, 1979). Texts about dignity and happiness were clearly juxtaposed with the vision of brutal violence and suffering. The Saver found there could bring hope but he disappeared in a crematory together with others that approached destruction in a joyful rage. The audience participated, also directly, by singing and acting together with the actors in a common ritual that evoked myths, symbols, elements of collective experience from the past.

It seemed obvious that since then Grotowski had been totally concentrated on acting. He was going to direct the potential of his actors who, due to an arduous training, achieved technical perfection and self-knowledge. He tended to overcome the art of performing by the act of devotion of a human being.

His idea was put into practice at the Institute of Acting – the Laboratory Theatre. It was rather a scientific institution than a traditional theatre. The Institute carried out tests on the actor's method in the 'Poor Theatre' in which the actor became most important. Everything was concentrated on the actor's spiritual process that was characterised by an extreme, complete denudation, an exposure of one's intimacy. Grotowski shaped a 'holy' actor (Grotowski, 1965, 1968, 1972; Osiński, 1980).

In this theatre, the method of educating the actor tended towards eliminating the obstacles which his organism may produce in the spiritual-mental

process. Grotowski wanted to discover the sources of human creative power. He wanted to make the actor aware of his physical and psychic personality.

The actor's exercises in Laboratory Theatre included gymnastics and acrobatic tricks, visual aspect of movement, mimicry, perfecting the actor's voice. The actor himself chose the set of exercises from this 'alphabet' so that he could achieve absolute fitness and perfection of voice after some time and find himself his own language of expression. It was important as the training itself did not form automatically the necessary code. An outstanding professional technique was not, however, the purpose itself. According to the theory of Poor Theatre, Grotowski's actor appeared on stage either nearly naked or in dress-like artificial limbs which cramped him. Depending on the actor's part the on-stage requisites got different meanings; they fulfilled different functions, changed into various symbols. There was no music in the Poor Theatre, instead one could hear actors' voices and sound effects that shaped the mood. These assumptions were put into practice in two performances: "*Książę Niezłomny*" ("The Constant Prince"), 1965, based on Calderon and the most important Grotowski's creation "*Apocalypsis cum Figuris*", 1968. The last performance was the result of training and improvisation whose final stage became the search for the text layer.

"*Apocalypsis*" showed the way man creates his God and abolishes him. The performance tried to answer the question: what would the second appearance of Christ in our world mean today? The group of figures overwhelmed by madness of an outrageous ritual decided to give one of them (Ciemny) the role of the Saviour. Further activities of the figures were to evoke the motives associated with the life of the Saviour – it was the source of drama continuity in the performance. At last the figure who was to play the role of the Saviour went away to avoid becoming a martyr. He was rejected by the group too. The subsequent scenes of the performance had a ritual character with an exposed orgiastic motif (Dzieduszycka, 1974).

The performance, deeply rooted in the contemporary time, was at the same time concerned with archetype motives. It showed the antinomies of human social life: the need for creation and destruction, faith and blasphemy, celebration and debauchery.

Acting in *Apocalypsis* went beyond the bounds of theatre. Evoking strong emotional tension it provoked intensive reactions of the audience,



participants of the performance-ritual. There was a genuine contact between people. The essence of the performance was reduced to the idea of human beings meeting one another.

Grotowski had to go beyond the limits of theatre. As a result there were many para-theatrical actions which were to present Grotowski's version of alternative culture.<sup>3</sup> He called it 'the active culture' (Grotowski, 1973, 1975; Osiński, 1980). The artist suggested returning to the most fundamental experience in order to revive the natural relationships of man and the world. The active culture was to abolish artificial division into creators of culture and those who perceive this creation (producers and consumers). Everybody had a chance to become a witness or a participant of an artistic creation, they could directly give sense to the surrounding reality. At the same time the barriers between people were broken as well as established schemes of behaviour and relations between man and his surrounding.

The activity of Laboratory Theatre of the 1970s tended to evoke this primary experience not only among the members of the group but also among the thousands of people participating in various workshops and actions. The range of influence of the idea of active culture and other forms of work of Grotowski and Laboratory Theatre was enormous and it undoubtedly shaped the system of values and methods of acting in the circles of students and then alternative theatre.

### 3. The growth of alternative theatre

The significant achievements of Polish culture paradoxically corresponded with the tragic social and political events of the 1960s and 70s that marked subsequent outbreaks of social dissatisfaction.<sup>4</sup>

March of 1968 was the time to be remembered for ever. It is worth mentioning that the theatre performance "*Dziady*" ("Forefathers' Eve")

<sup>3</sup> For example "*Święto*" ("Holiday"), "*Special Project, Przedsięwzięcie Góra*" ("Venture: Mountain").

<sup>4</sup> See chapter "History and Contemporary Politics of Poland 1939–2003" in this volume.

by *Adam Mickiewicz* at the National Theatre in Warsaw became one of the sore points as Polish authorities first of all noticed and criticised the anti-Russian, anti-Soviet and 'religious' accents. These events partly overlapped with the intellectual unrest that spread over the Western Europe and the USA in 1968.

One of the results of these events in Poland was a division of artistic circles into those loyal to the authorities and those that criticised the cultural policy of the state including the restrictions of censorship. It was also the beginning of the phenomenon called alternative culture whose important aspect was an expansion of students' theatre in Poland. The new students' theatre contributed to the discussion concerning essential problems of the country by means of performances which were significant not only for artistic circles but for the entire Polish culture.

The increasing conflicts and pressures were accompanied by an apparent process of changes in social awareness, especially among young people. It helped, especially after 1968, to a social movement of people who noticed the unbearably significant discrepancy between the officially proclaimed slogans and their dubious implementations. These people were aware of duality of values in social, political and cultural life, they witnessed an evident bias against intellectuals (especially manifested towards the young generation of educated Poles), general debasement of material standards and an increasing threat to the quality of public life.

In the field of culture it was frequently stressed that public life and officially supported culture were not genuine. The entire cultural policy was criticised, especially the institution of censorship which effectively blocked free expression of young artists.

Simultaneously, of great importance were the developments in the West in the field of theatre contestation (Living Theatre, Open Theatre, Performance Group, Bread and Puppet Theatre) as well as the original innovative activity of a few official creators of the institutional theatre in Poland.

The complicated, yet very inspiring social-political situation in Poland together with echoes of cultural revolution in Europe and the U.S.; the achievements of Kantor, Szajna, and Grotowski; all these factors formed a perfect background for the growth of alternative culture in our country,

the culture whose most important element was to be for sure, the rise of the alternative theatre.

"Investigations of the 'young theatre' were concerned (...) with ideas and values giving sense to all human activity; with circumstances and opportunities of communication between people; with the language, means of expression, ethic standards and patterns of behaviour; with the system of institutions and cultural circulation and with principles arranging all these elements into a unified construction". (Jawłowska, 1988, pp. 5–6).

This theatre became a centre of articulation of the problems important not only for the youth's environment. Continually discussed were culture degradation, depreciation of ideas, lack of moral standards, their helplessness in the face of officially accepted evil. The problems presented in the creations of the young theatre referred to Polish reality.

Many student theatres began their activity in Poland in the period of 1970–1980. It was a fashion for a special kind of intellectual needs, specific way of participating in culture, special language, appearance. First of all, however, it was the similar way of perceiving depravation and the way of reacting to it that were most relevant.

What was the world that this theatre presented to the audience? Above all it stressed the fact that a discrepancy between reality created by the institutions of the official culture and everyday experience of people came to a climax.

Here are a few relevant titles of performances of the alternative theatres in Poland in the period of 1970–1985 (Jawłowska, 1988; Nyczek, 1980):

- "*Spadanie*" ("Falling Down") by Theatre STU, 1970,
- "*Exodus*" by Theatre STU, 1974,
- "*Musimy poprzestać na tym, co tu nazwano rajem na ziemi...*?" ("Do We Have to Be Content with What Is Here Called a Paradise on Earth?") by Teatr Ósmego Dnia (Theatre of the Eighth Day), 1976,
- "*Gazeta – nasza codzienna lekcja*" ("Newspaper, Our Everyday Lesson") by Akademia Ruchu (Academy of Movement), 1976,
- "*Ach, jakże godnie żyliśmy*" ("Oh, How Decent Our Life Was!") by Teatr Ósmego Dnia, 1979,
- "*Exiled to the Paradise*" by Scena 6 (Stage 6), 1980,

- “*Nie nam lecieć na wyspy szczęśliwe*” (“It Is Not Us Who Fly to the Happy Islands”) by Theatre Provisorium, 1980,
- “*Odzyskać przepłakane lata*” (“To Regain the Years in Tears”) by Theatre Jedynka, 1980,
- “*Piotun*” (“Warmwood”) by Theatre of the Eighth Day, 1985.

The stage visions of these performances were dominated by the world presented as a complete chaos. In “Falling Down” by Theatre STU, it was the world of complete devaluation of ideas and words. In theatre space, the actors could not even find the geographic directions or any landmarks. The most dramatic vision of such a world was given by Theatre of the Eighth Day in their performance “Do We Have to Be Content with What Is Here Called a Paradise on Earth?” The setting of the performance is Hell. The actors search all the time for any sense of the world which surrounds them. How to live in the world realising that there is no idea in it? In another performance of this group entitled “*Jednym tchem*” (“With One Breath”), from 1971–72, the action takes place in a blood donation centre, thus symbolising a system of exploitation that kills people gradually, pumping out their blood. The day of a blood donor is like a wheel in a machine: sleeping, waking up, working, meal breaks, eating, so that you could work further on. Monotony, dullness, ugliness, and the feeling of despair.

In “*Wilgoć*” (“moisture”), 1978, produced by Scena Plastyczna KUL (Visual Stage of the Catholic University of Lublin) water dripping from everywhere made the theatre space soak in water. The end of the performance is one of the most moving visions ever created by the alternative theatre in Poland. A living human body, dripping with water is hung on the washing rope and that is all that remained of the ‘washed man’. It is a mixture of blood, sweat and water – the picture of common pain of a raped human being. At the end of 1980s, in a performance entitled “*Fantasia alla Polacca*”, 1989, by Theatre PstrągGroup’80, similar means of expression are used. The actors start their performance completely wet and play in this state for 45 minutes expressing physical and mental form of Polish people after the experience of previous years.

The important question ended the performance of “*Exodus*” by Theatre STU. At the end of this production members of a procession leave ‘the burnt land’ which is dominated by ugliness and artificiality of everyday

life. The actors lead the audience outside. But where to? Nobody knows. It is still only 1974.

Nearly until the end of the 1970s the Polish alternative theatre was clearly dominated by a deep protest against the world, yet departure was usually the final act. Close to 1980 the emphasis was more often laid on the need for resistance against the evil, the need for an independent work on changes. It was necessary to begin changing the man himself in the first place.

In 1978, Theatre Provisorium showed in its performance "*Nasza niedziela*" ("Our Sunday") the imaginative world of chaos, the world where it is assumed that no law exists anymore. The stage space is full of sacks and soft mattresses – the world where people are safe and comfortable, where life goes on due to the force of our inertia. It was one of the strongest accusations of people who submitted themselves to such a comfort.

In 1979 and 1980 many theatre groups showed their disapproval of reality in performances very convergent in meaning, yet produced in a different way.

The problem of crossing the gates of paradise that symbolises a decent life was discussed by Theatre of the Eighth Day in their production "Oh, How Decent Our Life Was!" The performance finishes with a sign of rebellion. In the dark, the words are heard, directed to the audience: "We have the right to speak. You have the right to listen. We all have the right to object!" (Jawłowska, 1988, p. 107).

In April 1980 Theatre Jedyńka from Gdańsk presented a performance of "To Regain The Years In Tears" which was almost a kind of dramatic prophecy. In this production, the group shows different spheres of life dominated by violence and vulgarity. At the end of the performance a young man runs out of the stage with a can of petrol. After a while flames burst out outside the window. The self-burning is a symbol of destruction, but also a sign of a rebirth. A few months later, in August 1980, 'Solidarity', the Independent Self-governing Trade Union was established on the Polish coast.

Let us sum up what picture of Polish reality of 1970s and 1980s we have learnt? The action is usually placed in theatre space such as a lunatic asylum, a jail cell, a psychiatric ward, a cabaret, a circus. It can also be a waiting room at the railway station or a bus going to nowhere. Hell. The world of absurd and chaos. The situation typical of these productions

embodies the state of threat to freedom under the pressure of physical or psychical violence. This violence is often personified by a ruler-dictator sometimes taking on the role of a symbolic figure: an inquisitor, watch-guard, clerk or journalist. The individuals fighting for their independence oppose the thoughtless primitive crowd. The school and mass media usually serve the purpose of indoctrination and the stupefying training.

The sense of common fault and common responsibility for forming and preserving evil are the most characteristic features of the young theatre. The attitude towards the world presented, that of grotesque and absurd reality, was clearly defined in these performances. What often happened was that the actors would suddenly break the convention of performance and address the audience directly.

The young theatre was often attacked for the lack of 'positive programme', for pessimism (Jawłowska, 1988). Yet we should remember that this theatre was not directly a political movement. It did not formulate a programme of the world's improvement. By its activity it suggested a kind of ethic programme. "The ethic theatre is the only one to be really free and in result really political. (...) The political value of theatre is not determined by subject matter itself, but by the ethos it declares and realises". (Informator Agencji Teatralnej, cited after Jawłowska 1988, p. 163). Formally, the ways of putting this ethos into practice were quite diverse, despite the fact that the attitudes and values presented were, to a large extent, convergent.

Of course the most often accepted model was that of the Theatre of the Eighth Day from Poznań. For the purpose of classification it may be defined as 'the theatre of scream'. This model was characterised by the use of strong means of expression. A complicated text was most often presented at the level of enormous intellectual emotions. Movement and gestures were expressive and energetic, approaching grotesque and caricature. Additionally it was accompanied by the use of rather simple, yet very equivocal symbolic objects. Plenty of groups gravitated towards this convention, following willingly Jerzy Grotowski and the achievements of American theatres of the 1960s and 1970s, especially of the Living Theatre.

Another interesting strong trend in Polish alternative theatre was the 'theatre of vision'. This model was (and still is) realised at length by the Visual Stage of KUL from Lublin – the world renowned group

directed by *Leszek Mądzik*, an artist and stage director. The group always performs in a specially built long tunnel so that in the dark every element in this space seems to be remote and secret. No words are used in this theatre and the actors together with plastic forms play only the role of elements in the artistic vision. Many years ago Mądzik was suspected of cultivating art for art's sake and critics tried to treat his theatre as a purely aesthetic one. But is there any more moving and more emotional meaningful image in theatre than that of wet people hanging on the ropes or the view of a big amount of soil spread on the big glass plate over the heads of the audience?

The convention of 'theatre of movement' is represented by the Academy of movement from Warsaw. This group, at present professional, surprises the audience with numerous experiments on human movement and gesture. Sometimes monotonous repetitions of gestures, stressing automatism of human activities and habits manifest an enormous engagement of the group in a battle against life routines. The street actions of the Academy of movement are the best reflection of their aims.

In 1978, Theatre Association *Gardzienice* starts to perform and from the very beginning its members search for a natural environment for their theatre. It is a kind of mission whose purpose is to find people who represent culture unspoilt by civilisation. The group is keen on the authentic contact with local public, examines the elements of local culture, includes some of them in their presentations and the villagers are their first audience. The group shares with the viewers their theatre experience, their way of perception of the world. Stage productions of *Gardzienice* become complicated 'operas' based on vocal and movement.

As suggested in this brief review, the young theatre in Poland used various forms of artistic expression. None of them trapped the theatre in a confined space. Following the idea of 'open theatre' the groups penetrated various social environments, performing for every audience, under all conditions.

All the forms that remain on the verges of theatre and fine arts constitute a separate problem. We think about events, environments, performances, happenings. Yet we will not discuss them at length. Worth mentioning, however, is a very interesting artistic and sociological phenomenon, a kind of theatre in life, namely the movement of the Orange Alternative (Fydrych and Dobosz, 1989).

#### 4. The Orange Alternative and recent development in alternative theatre

The activity of the Orange Alternative is based on the so-called Manifesto of the Socialist Surrealism, formulated by *Waldemar Maria Fydrych*, the group's leader. It assumes that the form of socialist system is so absurd that it reached the sphere of surrealism, and owing to this, some phenomena and institutions became a part of surrealistic art, e. g. The army and police belong to this sphere of life. Following this line of thinking, Fydrych took on a pseudonym 'Major', and he announced Wrocław the Fortress of the Orange Alternative. Moreover, the groups of people who co-operated with him were organised in the military way into battalions, companies etc., and they were sent to 'battles' according to a military strategy. Fydrych's followers and the inhabitants of Wrocław were informed about forthcoming events by means of leaflets and wall notices. The groups of the Orange Alternative were active in other towns as well, for example in Warsaw or Łódź (here as the *Galeria Działań Maniakalnych* (Gallery of Maniacal Activities)).

In December 1981, when martial law was introduced in Poland, there were a lot of political slogans on the walls that opposed the government and praised 'Solidarity'. Every day the relevant services covered these disloyal statements with dye. Fydrych's people began drawing brownies on these spots. Hundreds of brownies on the walls! The police and other authorities were confused. They decided to cover the brownies with dye. It was the beginning of an absurd fight between the police and the young wall painters.

The 6<sup>th</sup> of December is celebrated in Poland as the day of Santa Claus and on this day children are given presents. It was Fydrych's idea to send huge troops of Santa Clauses to the streets and have them approach passers-by and give away sweets. The police ridiculed themselves once again chasing Santa Clauses in the streets. Of course a few 'real' Santa Clauses employed by big department stores were arrested as well.

Another great provocation was caused by the action arranged on the Day of Police (in Poland we celebrated the holidays for many working groups, including the police and secret service). Fydrych ordered his 'comrades' to celebrate this holiday. The crowd of young people gave flowers and



candies to policemen in the streets. Police treated it as a clear provocation and arrested many people, including accidental passers-by that were carrying flowers.

The movement of the Orange Alternative can not be defined in heterogeneous categories. It was obviously a unique phenomenon in Europe that can only be compared to the Fluxus movement or the movement of YIP (Youth International Party) in the USA in 1960s.

This movement provided evidence for the great inventiveness and involvement of people and it revealed the fact that when in larger gatherings they would willingly show emotions... As far as the theatrical layer is concerned, it confirmed the importance of theatre of 'guerilla' type, having its roots in happenings and improvised events.

This review of different theatre conventions and forms of theatre and para-theatre creations illustrates the great intellectual and artistic potential conveyed by the movement of Polish independent theatre. First of all, it was a rich offer of ethic-moral proposals, different from the models of attitudes in the official culture. The movement of young theatre became a disobedient activator of social unrest among the youth. There were permanent attempts to limit its vividness, attempts to lock it in its own environment only. They were realised by isolating theatre events from other interdisciplinary artistic actions and multiplying the administrative and organisational obstacles, by preventing the groups from their free activity. Although this kind of difficulties could be overcome, there were other means of harassment that were much more dangerous.

In the late 1970s and after introduction of martial law in 1980s there were numerous cases of interference on the part of state censors and several performances were even banned. Taking risks, theatres used all possible means to present their creations despite a ban. These productions were presented during 'closed' performances – available only to the invited guests, and sometimes after another title had been announced in the poster. This strange 'battle' resulted in cancelling, upon demand of local authorities, the shows that were advertised earlier. In addition, groups of actors were fined and some members were arrested for 48 hours or summoned for inquiry by state security officers. In consequence, the authorities gradually removed the alternative theatres, for example, from universities. The most

extreme and outrageous example was that of dissolving in 1984 the Theatre of the Eighth Day after it had been turned into a professional company. Its members emigrated to Italy and performed mainly in the West since then. In 1970s and 1980s the most 'disloyal' groups had difficulties with foreign travel as they were often refused passports. The last consequence was of course the subjective press propaganda that attempted to discredit the achievements of the young theatre in Poland.

Polish alternative theatre entered the decade of the 1980s with outstanding performances anticipating the events of August 1981. In their performances young artists supported the ideas expressed later by workers' protests on the coast of Poland. The best performances of this transitional period attempted to sum up Polish fate from a universal point of view, to define it in the categories of European history and culture, expanding the background to present Polish issues.<sup>5</sup> They were not historical chronicles but attempts of an artistic synthesis. Life was presented there as a state of suspense and anxiety, and people as helpless and confused creatures uncertain of their fate.

Gradually the reflection referring to the activity of the alternative theatre was accompanied by some critical remarks concerning the lack of responsibility for the reality. It was noticed that the most important things take place beyond theatre that once used to be a method of changing the world. It was observed that there was no will to build the awareness of the generation, to search for its own artistic expression.

The martial law caused disintegration of the young theatre generation and the actual lack of uniformity of this movement. Everyday life began to outstrip artistic reality. Creation and perception of culture lost their essential position in the life of young people. Eventually, in the early 1980s the students' circles had no longer any culture-creative role. As a result of this phenomenon, what used to be defined as students' culture was atomised and overtaken by other circles that were able to form creative attitudes.

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<sup>5</sup> "Więcej niż jedno życie" ("More Than One Life") by the Theatre of the Eighth Day, "Pusta estrada" ("An Empty Stage") by Theatre Provisorium, "Powracająca fala" ("The Returning Wave") by Teatr Niespokojny (Restless Theatre).

At the difficult time of martial law the Catholic church and the centres of Christian culture played an important role in preserving the ethic and aesthetic values of the young theatre.

The restrictions of censorship led to penetrating the areas of theatre which were previously the object of interest for alternative groups and for professional actors who wanted to express themselves beyond the institutional state structures. Theatre audience, used to searching for certain themes on the stage of the young theatre, could find them now beyond this theatre, which fact contributed to the further exodus of the public from the students' theatre.

A new cultural landscape was created, dominated by mixed groups of college students and school pupils working under the auspices of culture centres, clubs, centres of extra-activity work. The same happened in small towns that had been deprived of the alternative culture model before. It was a symptom of a new phenomenon – the young theatre's inclination towards social-cultural existence of secondary importance. New small circles of supporters were formed whose awareness, often local and fragmentary, was transformed into performances. Artistic circulation took place only in the local society and, what is more important, did not go beyond local awareness.

Stage productions of the early 1980s originated from the reflection over the lost chance for freedom (resulting in the introduction of martial law in Poland) and the analysis of social reception of this event. "Wormwood" by Theatre of the Eighth Day was a kind of evaluation of the beginning of the 1980s. The performance about young Polish people reacting to the influence of politics on life, escaping to the world of dreams, making decisions about internal and external emigration, was an artistic effect of reaction to that time. In the mid 1980s, apart from contesting the martial law and creating the vision of reality dominated by the totalitarian authorities and the society subject to physical and psychic trauma there appeared performances which, as in the late 1970s, drew our attention to common responsibility for life in humility.<sup>6</sup> The decreasing social resistance, smaller

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<sup>6</sup> They were often presented in a patriotic and religious manner though in the universal context.

interest in alternative culture, the economic situation and partial conformity of attitudes brought the need for performances emphasising dullness and objectification of human feelings, desires and activities. The 'young theatre' created "a contemporary story of Polish provincialism, the inferiority complex, the social reality seen as a familiar senseless fight with seasonal enemies, led by a stupefied nation that unwillingly accepts everything to live in peace, to survive in a den, together with mates who chose a similar compromise" (Głomb, 1986, p. 30).

After some time, the attitude of young creators towards the theatre of their predecessors changes. Values and principles characteristic of the traditions of students' theatre are still valid as we can not, regardless of time, get rid of the universal ethic categories. Theatre groups still wish to present their critical vision of the world. First of all, however, the theatre form is verified. New groups do not want to be compared to the groups of the 1970s. They state that the language of theatre creations staged 10–15 years before is anachronistic at the moment, especially that the new audience is different.

It was Theatre Wiatyk that attracted much interest due to the original poetics of their performances. They used 'hedonistic pessimism' and black absurd created according to the rules of a slapstick comedy. Wearing a mask of aggressive scoffers, the group made a kind of nihilist protest full of moral and artistic provocation.

An original grim sense of humour from Silesia could also be observed in the performances of Theatre 12a from Katowice. In their creations there were some echoes of pre-war avant-garde Surrealism.

The anarchical poetic of madness was typical of the work of Theatre Pstrąg-Group'80 from Łódź that, starting from the middle of the decade, began to define itself as 'debil theatre' and used absurd to react to the scruffiness of the surrounding world. The controlled chaos was an expression of the feeling of disintegration and falsification of social-political changes and it showed reality as the set of conventionalised behaviours, gestures and symbols that make one perceive everyday life as a complete absurd.

In the 1980s (and later in the 1990s) many groups used the elements of ludicrous popular culture, moving away from notorious avant-garde approach and elite intellectualism of creations of the previous decade. More

and more often the potential of paraphrase was used as well as the synthesis of theatre forms, styles, symbols and motives. Some groups used pastiche and parody, they multiplied the levels of distance towards themselves – in other words, they used a variety of means of expression typical of the post-modernist culture. These features were most often manifested by the groups that willingly presented their work outside theatre venues. The street theatre, as in the whole Europe, was easily fascinated by the poetics of deconstruction and new carnival (Herich, 1994). Open-air theatre and street happenings became common (earlier it was successfully done by the Academy of Movement) and it started to be one of the most characteristic phenomena which appeared as a domain of the young theatre of the 1980s.

On the whole, the sphere of theatre penetration expanded widely, especially within small local societies (understood in the demographic and territorial way). We can observe development of such phenomena as 'theatre for life', 'children's theatre', 'theatre for oneself' or 'religious', 'ethnic' and 'folk theatre' in the areas where the elements of the tradition of alternative theatre, the values typical of it and the methods used by it are present together with the same social-cultural elements (Leśnikowski, 1995; Śliwonik, 1993).

Mutual permeability of the spheres of institutional and alternative theatre was a fact. The need of some professional actors to look for a new space for their activities made them enter the area previously occupied by the young theatre. On the other hand, some groups that used to act and cultivate the experience of the student and alternative movement found their place in the pantheon of the whole contemporary Polish theatre once distinct borders dividing these two areas of theatre gradually blurred.

In 1989, Poland faced a lot of significant transformations of economic and political system. Having got rid of the dominating ideology and the authorities of Communism, the country endeavoured revision of the past and formation of new reality. Polish alternative theatre, which had always been a barometer of social and political attitudes and a catalyst of changes, found itself in a new situation. After 1989, many people denied its right to existence stating that its role was finished.

In fact its role was justified by these three characteristic features: the young theatre was always in the organisational opposition to all the forms of the professional institutional theatre, the artistic opposition, being the source of novelty and research within the theatre form and, what is most important, the ethical opposition, as the young theatre used to focus its activity on the ethicalmoral norms and social-political attitudes different from those approved and presented in the official culture.

Even today the first two factors seem to make the phenomenon unique. The alternative theatre still functions on the fringe of official culture and works mostly without permanent seats, venues, administration workers etc. On the other hand, we should remember that the scope of the alternative theatre was broadened to a large extent by unemployed professional actors who took advantage of the forms of work developed by independent theatre groups in the 1970s and 1980s.

As far as artistic features go the alternative theatre is still, though possibly to smaller extent, the source of novelty in the theatre. It relies on elements of advanced convention of theatre of absurd, phenomena from the fringe of theatre and visual art, happenings, elements of techno culture or phenomena which can on the whole be defined as manifestations of post-modernist culture. After eliminating the political and ethical censorship, owing to the free transfer of information and ideas, the official theatre undoubtedly searches for new forms of artistic expression. It is, however, limited to a certain by the necessity to go with the taste of popular public, not always approving of deviations from the traditional forms of expression in the theatre. These assuring theatre endeavours are obviously the result of commercial aspects, increasingly aggressive and often crucial for theatre's existence.

This theatre did not seem to be of any importance after all the longexpected changes, when 'the evil' had been overcome. It turned out, however, that the political dimension of the young theatre activity so much emphasised by critics was only one of the elements of its intellectual content.

From the late 1980s on, the young generation generally disapproved of political life as a whole, and showed a variety of ideological attitudes which rejected previously obvious 'black-and-white' view of the world and belief

that replacing the evil political system with a new 'good' one will bring solution to all the problems.

The differentiation of attitudes brought manifestations of nihilist and even anarchist character. Significant about it is the rejection of all the notions essential for building the citizens' state and revived in new circumstances. Words like motherland, patriotism, nation, nationalism, disgraced and devaluated at the time of Communism, were to contribute to the character of the new-coming 'honest' days.

The phenomenon of lack of affirmation refers to a large extent to the direction of changes that have been under way in Poland recently. The direction 'to the West' taken up in politics and economy occasionally results in painful consequences, e.g. impoverishing of some public sectors. However, the threat mostly emphasised by the independent theatre is endangerment of cultural identity caused by the West European perspective. The slow unification and 'Americanisation' of cultural demand for other than consumptive attitudes raise questions about the systems of values and cause anxiety about the future of Polish culture.

The issues mentioned above have undoubtedly found their appropriate position in the intellectual content of theatre productions. They were accompanied by the necessary and consciously introduced changes in the theatre form and the evolution of relations between the actors and the audience.

Using the elements of improvisation and happening the groups showed local problems in the wider more universal context. This context constituted the essence of revolution as a phenomenon that in its course is often transferred into the phase of its own caricature. It brings disappointment to those who entrusted it and promotes only new people and new 'Gods' while leaving old, familiar structures. The severe means of expression indicated that the groups went beyond the convention of theatre of absurd.

At the same time a change of theatre form occurred. It was mainly characterised by eliminating the verbal layer to use only the non-verbal means of expression. In the group's opinion, the grotesque and equivocal scenes helped to create the necessary distance to people.

In the productions of the 1990s, apart from the retrospection with some elements of lyricism, the essential motif was the question of the future

raised at the end of the performance, the expression of anxiety referring to the character and results of the new-coming changes.

The performances were characterised by a kind of auto-ironic reflection on the lost ideals, ambitions, and time wasted. There was also nostalgia for the foregone 'old-fashioned' elements of Polish tradition and culture. The very nostalgic performances presented the elements which through generations built 'otherness' and the identity of a nation -from the intellectual basis formed e.g. By a literary canon, through the glorious facts from Polish history, up to the characteristics of Polish mentality, tradition and culture. Symbolically hidden in suitcases, these elements accompany Poles travelling into the future towards the more and more unified reality, deprived of its originality and sentiments.

The alternative theatre is based on the existence of evil and pathology in various forms: intolerance, rejection, violence and suffering. As long as they are present in our consciousness and common experience, they will result in the phenomenon of rebellion and opposition, especially among young people. The young will thus talk about their problems and they will need another, characterised by tolerance, perception of the world – also by means of theatre. It is the matter of fundamental honesty, whenever theatre is regarded as a place of social activity.

*Translated by Elżbieta Rodzeń-Leśnikowska*





1. 'Replica III', scr. and dir. Józef Szajna (Nancy, World Theatres Festival, 1973); Reprodukacja za: M. Czanerle (1974). *Szajna*. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo Morskie.



2. 'The Dead Class', scr. and dir. T. Kantor, Theatre 'Cricot 2', 1975; Reprodukacja za: K. Pleśniarowicz (1990). *Teatr Śmierci Tadeusza Kantora*. Chotomów: VERBA Sp. z o.o.



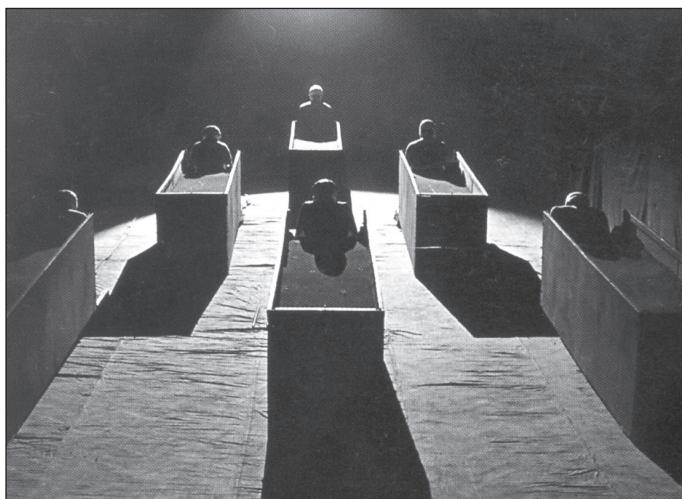
3. 'Apocalypsis cum Figuris', dir. Jerzy Grotowski, Institute of Acting – Laboratory Theatre, 1969; Reprodukacja za: A. Grodzicki (1979). *Polish Theatre Directors*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Interpress.



4. 'Exodus', dir. Krzysztof Jasiński, Theatre 'STU', 1974; Reprodukacja za: *Teatr STU*. (1982), pod red. E. Chudzińskiego i T. Nyczka, Warszawa: Młodzieżowa Agencja Wydawnicza.



5. 'Dance As Long As You Can', Theatre of the Eighth Day, 1994; Reprodukcja za: Folder Łódzkich Spotkań Teatralnych 1999, fot. Michał Browarski.



6. 'Fettering', dir. Leszek Mądzik, Visual Stage of KUL, 1986, Reprodukacja za: Folder Łódzkich Spotkań Teatralnych 1999, fot. Stefan Ciechan.